

# STELLA

## 2017 STELLA PRIZE SHORTLIST

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### *Sampler*



**Maxine Beneba Clarke**  
THE HATE RACE

'Where are you from?' my teacher asked brightly.

'Pardon, Mrs Kingsley?'

'Where are you from?'

Unsure of the answer she wanted, I stared at her for a moment.

'From my mum's tummy,' I replied matter-of-factly.

A faint titter of amusement ran around the room. The class was suddenly extremely attentive.

'That's not what I meant, Maxine,' said my teacher curtly.

I stared at her, confused.

'The class is interested in where you're from, Maxine,' she said insistently.

I racked my brain, staring at the clear plastic boxes of counting blocks stacked up on the bookshelf behind Mrs Kingsley. I imagined myself tipping them all out, fashioning them into a Lego-like ladder and climbing away out of the classroom window.

'From my mum's . . . *vagina*?' I said tentatively.

The class erupted into giggles.

'You *rude* girl!' Mrs Kingsley looked furious. 'You know what I am asking. Why are you being so *insolent*? What country were you born in?'

'This one.' My head was hurting now.

'Oh,' said Mrs Kingsley 'Well . . . where are your parents from?'

'They came here from England.'

Mrs Kingsley was glaring at me again. A boy called Matthew, who was sitting at the back of the room, right next to where our teacher was standing, started laughing.

'They're not from England!' he said scathingly. 'My nanna's from England and your parents are not like *her*. They're not English, Mrs Kingsley!'

I knew my parents had come to Australia from England.

I had even been back there when I was smaller, to visit my grandparents and cousins. I remembered a bit of it. There were photos of me and Cecelia and Bronson on a sled in the snow with our gumboots and parkas on.

'I want you to go home and ask your parents where they're from,' said my teacher. 'And you can come back and tell us properly tomorrow. Does anyone have any other questions?'

Rebecca, a sweet pale-faced girl with red hair, raised her arm.

'Yes, Rebecca?' My teacher seemed relieved that the conversation was moving along.

'What do . . . people like you . . . *feel like*?'

'What do you mean, Rebecca?' Mrs Kingsley asked, exasperated.

'You'll have to explain the question to her a little better than that, darling.'

'I mean, do you have *normal* feelings . . . like normal people do?'

Silence fell over the classroom as all of the other six-year-olds waited eagerly for my answer. Outside the classroom window, a pack of galahs was tearing apart one of the gum trees, shrieking and squawking as they tore the nuts from the branches and dropped them onto the wooden seats below. I looked over at them for a moment, then back into the classroom. The three ceiling fans hummed as they whirred lopsidedly around.

'I don't know,' I said quietly. 'I don't know if I have normal feelings like normal people do.'

When my Student of the Week question time had finished, Mrs Kingsley asked me to choose a piece of A4 cardboard to use for my Student of the Week album. I chose a sunflower-yellow piece of card, and walked slowly back to my seat. The cardboard would be passed around the class that day, with each student writing down something nice about me in brightly coloured pencil. At the end of the day, the poster would be pinned to the noticeboard, and at the end of the week, I'd get to take it home.

I watched, throughout the day, as the brightly coloured rectangle moved from desk to desk. Eventually, it landed on the desk next to mine. My best friend Jennifer slowly read down the page, looked over at me, picked up her pink pencil and began to write. She worked away for about ten minutes, stopping every now and then to think.

Jennifer was a shy girl with thin brown-blonde hair and a delicate sparrow-like face. Her family, the McGuires, had been one of the few that had welcomed my parents on their arrival in Kellyville, and us kids were frequently at their house playing with Jen and her brother and sister. Jen had been at preschool with me, and we started school at the same time. We never spoke about the differences between us, or about the indignities I suffered on account of them, but in my memories of early primary school Jen is always there, standing next to me, unmoving.

'Once you've finished, hand the album over to Maxine, please, dear,' Mrs Kingsley instructed. 'Then she can read it out and we can pin it up.'

Reluctantly, Jennifer handed me the piece of card. I ran my eyes down the misspelled comments.

*Maxine is brown.*

*Maxine has brown skin.*

*Maxine has funny curly hair.*

*Maxine thinks her family is from England.*

*Maxine has dark brown skin.*

*Maxine is nice and Maxine is black.*

*Maxine is friendly.*

*Maxine is not Australian.*

*Maxine is brown and she does dancing.*

*Maxine has a black family and a little brother.*

*Maxine doesn't know about her feelings.*

*Maxine is brown.*

*She is brown.*

*She has brown skin.*

At the bottom of the list was a whole paragraph written neatly in bright pink pencil.

'Stand up and read out your album, Maxine!' Mrs Kingsley said. 'I'm sure the class had some lovely things to write about you.'

I stood up, pushing my chair back away from the desk, and read out

the one pink paragraph at the bottom, written by my friend Jennifer.

*'Maxine is friendly and smart. She is a good reader. She plays the piano. She has a brother and a sister. She is very good at spelling. She is a happy girl, and I like to play with her. She is my friend.'*

'Well, isn't that nice?' said Mrs Kingsley. 'Would you like to pin the album up to remind us what a special student we have in our class this week?'

I paused for a moment. 'Can I please go to the toilet, Mrs Kingsley?'

'Okay . . . but you must be quick, dear. Pin the album up on the wall on your way out, please.'

I picked up the piece of cardboard, clutching it with both hands, and moved towards the door. Inside the empty girl's toilet block, I re-read my Student of the Week album then tore a jagged line between Jennifer's words and the other comments.

I read Jennifer's words out loud to myself once, then twice, then four more times. I had never had anything written about me before, except for my kindergarten school reports and things the doctor wrote down in her folder when I was sick. The things Jennifer wrote were solid things now. She had grabbed them from the air when I spoke to the class, and listened to them.

She had made them *real*. I didn't even care about the rest of the comments. I folded up the jagged bit of cardboard containing Jennifer's words, and zipped the small rectangle into my tunic pocket. I tore the rest of the page up into tiny pieces, opened the door to one of the toilet cubicles, and watched as the yellow flakes slowly turned to sog inside the toilet bowl.